

In Praise of Elizabeth Hardwick; The Enthusiast

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Body

There are books that enter your life before their time; you can acknowledge their beauty and excellence, and yet walk away unchanged. This was how I first read Elizabeth Hardwick’s “Sleepless Nights,” after it was recommended in David Shields’ “Reality Hunger,” a thrilling manifesto that tries to make the case that our contemporary world is no longer well represented by realist fiction. While I loved “Sleepless Nights” on that first read — it is brilliant, brittle and strange, a book unlike any preconceived notion I had of what a novel could be — I moved on from it easily. I’ve lived two thousand and some odd days since, read hundreds of other books and published three of my own, all in a bright, hot landscape of somewhat-realist fiction.

The middle of the night has become a lonely stretch of time, especially in the past few years, with vastly increased anxiety — over climate change and politics and what lies in wait in my little sons’ future. I normally salve insomnia with reading, but few new books have felt so revolutionary or so brave as to be able to rock my tired brain to attention. Only the great ones remain: George Eliot’s infinite wisdom in “Middlemarch,” Jane Austen’s gracious and low-stakes sublimity, Dante’s “The Inferno,” which makes our world above seem downright kind. And strangely, of all the books I have reread to comfort myself, I have turned most often to Hardwick’s “Sleepless Nights,” not without a little bitter tang of irony because of its title. The book didn’t dovetail with my heart on the first reading, but the world has changed around me, and now I find myself hungering for its particularity, the steady voice of Elizabeth Hardwick a balm to my aching, vulnerable mind.

Elizabeth Hardwick grew up in Kentucky, a charming young woman with a dagger of a mind. She left for New York City after college and took up with the Partisan Review crowd, becoming best friends with Mary McCarthy and writing for The New York Review of Books from its inception. “Sleepless Nights,” her third novel, is unambiguously her chef d’oeuvre; it was published when she was 63, after a career of writing sharp, ingenious pieces of criticism and after her long marriage to (and divorce from, then reunification with) the poet Robert Lowell, whose profound psychological struggles and infidelities and plagiarism of Hardwick’s letters in his books must surely have tested her strength. As a result, “Sleepless Nights” feels elemental, an eruption of everything that had been slowly building up over decades. Though there are books that are distant kin to it — Renata Adler’s “Speedboat,” Maggie Nelson’s “Bluets” — I have read nothing close enough to be called a sibling. This is rare; a feat of originality.

“Sleepless Nights” brings the profound gift of plotlessness, as it is organized more like a piece of music than like a traditional novel, with its long slow build of themes and lives; as such, you can open it to any chapter and start to read, just as you can play movements from a symphony out of order without damaging the experience of letting individual movements pour over you. You can put the novel down at 3 a.m. and toddle off to bed, then pick it up in a different place a week later, and be carried away by its voice and description and sheer astonishing linguistic power and flexibility.

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In the novel, our protagonist, also named Elizabeth, is seen only out of the corner of the eye, not as the focus or subject of the book, but rather as the one who draws an outline of herself through precise and laserlike observations of the places and the people she has loved. In her review of the novel at the time of publication, Diane Johnson called it a “work of negative capability.” It is also a vision of a radical new kind of writing, one suited to a woman’s body and language and experience outside of the primarily masculine narrative tropes of the past.

It slowly occurs to the reader that Hardwick is developing her own sharp vision of a female narrative mode in her work: fragmentary, allusive, shifting in its layers of time, sharp as a Fury’s whip. Most of the subjects of her memories are women: Elizabeth’s Kentuckian mother who’d had nine children, with her “round, soft curves, her hair twisted into limp curls at the temples, her weight on the stepladder washing windows, her roasts and potatoes and fat yeast rolls; and her patient breathing in the back room as she lay sleeping in a lumpy old feather bed.” From New York City of the 1940s, Billie Holiday walks seductively into the text, “glittering, somber and solitary,” a woman singing her own oracular doom. There is a loyal, ravaged Irish housekeeper in Boston named Josette, whose “grayness was filled with light and it is an embarrassment to speak of one so good.”

From “Sleepless Nights,” I have moved on to other Hardwick books, particularly to her essays, which never fail to dazzle with their lightning-bolt insights and cool clarity. Her book “Seduction and Betrayal” is an early feminist consideration of literary history, a passionate and conflicted and exhilarating tour through the mind of a critic who seems to know absolutely everything. Hardwick’s own great passion was reading: in her Paris Review interview, she said that “in reading certain works, not all works, I do sometimes enter a sort of hallucinatory state and I think I see undercurrents and light in dark places about the imagined emotions and actions.”

Darryl Pinckney writes gorgeously of his friend, saying that “She believed in the masterpiece and defined a genius as someone who cannot be imitated but who somehow leaves the literary landscaped changed,” and that “she thought a flawed work often had more to teach us,” than a perfect one does.

Elizabeth Hardwick has become a friend, although she died before I could meet her. I delight in her wit and intelligence, and find her criminally underappreciated by bookish people, perhaps because she is subtle, and because her light beams outward into the world, not back to illuminate herself. She shows us the many ways of being a human, if we could only look harder and love more deeply all that we’re seeing.

There is such sympathy in Hardwick’s fleeting glances; it feels that each character, writer, or book she considers is held, for a moment, in her generous yet unsparing palm. Her sympathy extends all the way to the exhausted reader, the heartbroken reader, the reader who, like Bartleby, would prefer not to engage with the world, the reader who is too frightened or anxious or weary or sick; this reader too is carried along with Hardwick’s fine intelligence. With Elizabeth Hardwick as a guide, for a minute or for a long white night, one can almost forget the darkness pressing in.

Elizabeth Hardwick: A Starter Kit

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PHOTO: The novelist and literary critic Elizabeth Hardwick in Castine, Me. in the 1980s. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Susan Wood/Getty Images FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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